

## About the Artist: Lemi Ponifasio



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN WESTERBACK

Lemi Ponifasio is a theater director, New Zealand Arts Laureate, tufuga, and Samoan high chief; he has been described as a profound visionary whose work transcends genres to redefine the power of art. In 1995 he founded MAU, a theater company and creative forum for collaborative engagement among artists, scholars, community leaders, and activists. MAU now regularly performs in the most prestigious international arts festivals.

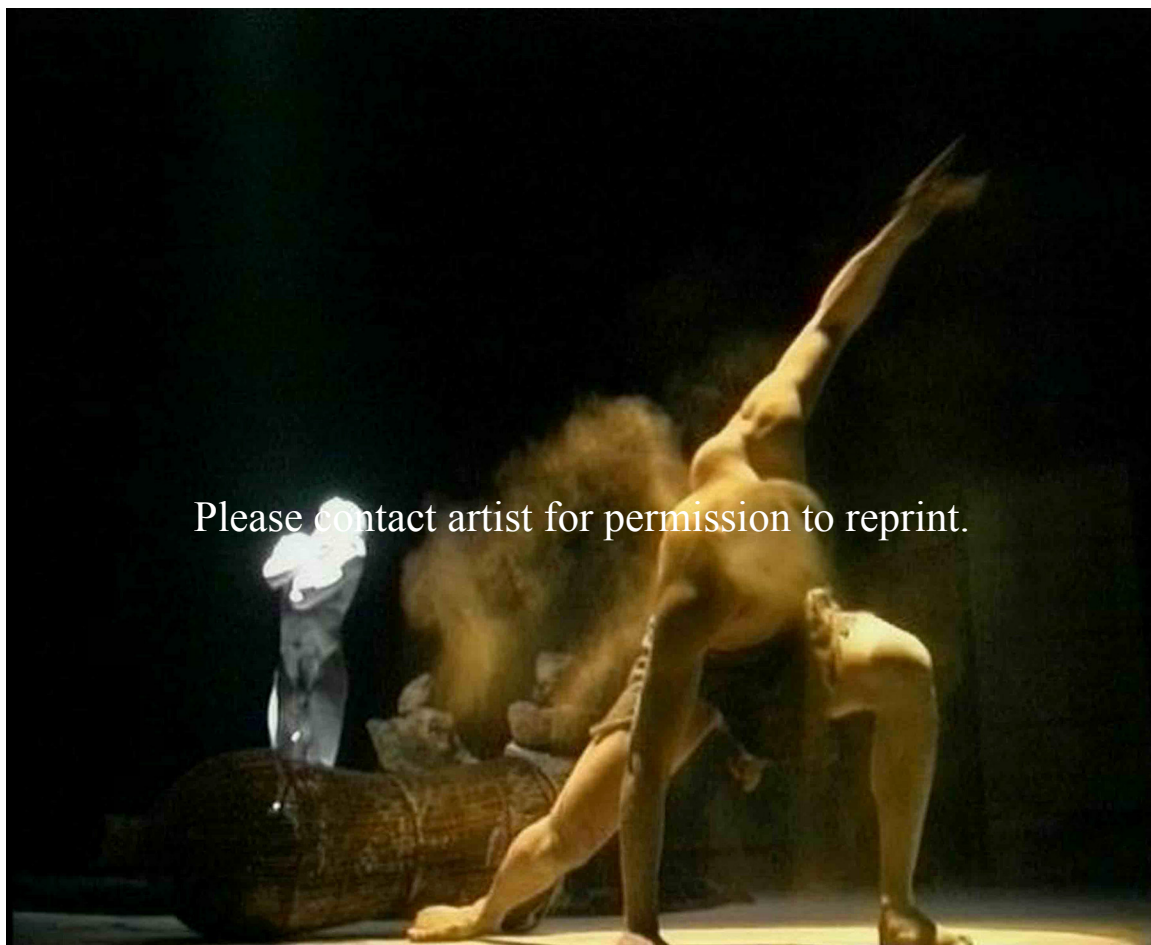
While exploring themes of universal significance, works such as *Tempest: Without a Body* and *Birds With Skymirrors* also draw attention to issues of current concern in the Pacific. When Māori activist Tame Iti performed in MAU's production of *Tempest: Without a Body* (2007), themes of power, oppression, and increasing state control in a post-9/11 world gained potency through Iti's physical presence, his association with protests over crown confiscation of Ngai Tuhoe tribal land, and detention following unlawful 2007 New Zealand Police raids into Tuhoe communities made under the 2002 Terrorism Suppression Act. In *Birds With Skymirrors* (2009), the intricacy, swiftness, and precision of Kiribati dance movement, Māori poi, and Samoan slap dance resonated with haunting strains of karanga (ancestral Māori calls), mechanical drone, and breath,

within a world of sensual detail, spatial depth, and shadows. Made after Ponifasio had seen frigate birds in Tarawa flying with glittering magnetic videotape in their beaks, this work evoked the sense of uncertainty many Pacific Islanders feel (including some of the artists within the MAU company) when confronting the effects of climate change—rising sea levels, loss of land, and threats to cultural integrity.

Seeking to provoke conversations between artists, communities, and audiences in global contexts, Ponifasio is concerned that his work not be constrained through labeling it as “Pacific,” “Oceanic,” or “indigenous.” Resisting such categorization, Ponifasio imbues his work with reference to multiple histories and philosophical, cultural, and spiritual traditions. For audience members aware of the complexities of Samoan participation in *Völkerschauen* (nineteenth-century touring exhibitions), the Samoan MAU revolt against German and New Zealand occupation, and Pacific responses to Christianity (including the Ringatu or Ratana religious movements in Aotearoa), the fact that Ponifasio is equally at home reading Heidegger, Shakespeare, or Greek mythology, while producing work for global consumption, may come as no surprise. Theater in an expanded realm of global consciousness is not only about representation but also about provocation—challenging us to consider the limits of our collective and creative imagination.

MOANA NEPIA

*The art featured in this issue can be viewed in full color in the online versions.*



*Bone Flute* (2000). Photo courtesy of MAU.

Concept, choreography, direction by Lemi Ponifasio; light by Helen Todd; music by Hirini Melbourne, Lemi Ponifasio, and Marc Chesterman; performers Ioane Papalii and Peresetene Afato.

In a series of shows grouped under the title *Bone Flute*, Ponifasio worked with Hirini Melbourne, a Māori composer and taonga puoro (traditional Māori instruments) expert. For performances at the 2000 Festival of Pacific Arts in New Caledonia, Ponifasio collaborated with performers from a Māori maurakau (traditional Māori weaponry) group from Waikato and Whitireia Community Polytechnic in Porirua. *Bone Flute iwi iwi* was then presented by the Adelaide Festival 2002.



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*Stones In Her Mouth* (2013). Photo by Zan Wimberley, Carriageworks, Sydney. Concept, choreography, and direction by Lemi Ponifasio; light by Helen Todd; mōteatea (Māori chant) composition by Ria Te Uira Paki, Te Ara Vakaafi, Rangipo Wallace-Ihakara, and Mere Boynton; sound by Sam Hamilton and Lemi Ponifasio; performers Kasina Campbell and Ria Te Uira Paki.

*Stones In Her Mouth* premiered in Los Angeles in 2013 and features ten Māori women as transmitters of life force through oratory, ancient chants, choral work, and dance. About this work, Ponifasio commented in an interview with Hannah McKee in the *Dominion Post* (Wellington, 3 April 2014): “I’ve always wanted to make this work and find a way of relating with women—especially Maori women—so the work is really about their power and beauty and not Maori song and dance or women necessarily fighting for something. I’m not a fighter of anything, I just invite people to a conversation.”



*Birds With Skymirrors* (2010). Photo by Sebastian Bolesch.

Concept, design, choreography, and direction by Lemi Ponifasio; light by Helen Todd; musical compositions from Russel Walder, Richard Nunns, Justin Redding, Marc Chesterman, and Sam Hamilton; "Soundscape with Lake and River" by Douglas Lilburn; live recording excerpt from *Requiem* by Lemi Ponifasio; performer Ioane Papalii.

"*Birds With Skymirrors* is lament, dreamscape, threnody, requiem, moonscape, a conference of birds, a ceremony of circumstance, the last dance on earth, the final gasp, a challenge, a karanga, an ancient futuristic ritual, a plea for humanity. . . . Measured, meticulous, provocative, and powerful, Lemi Ponifasio takes between his teeth the dilemma of climate change and shakes it with dignified strength; lion like" (Lyne Pringle, *Theatre Review* [New Zealand], 1 March 2012). The work premiered at Festival Theatre der Welt in Germany.

"It all adds up to a passionate cry for—and from—a beautiful wilderness" (Alice Bain, *The Guardian*, 19 Aug 2010).

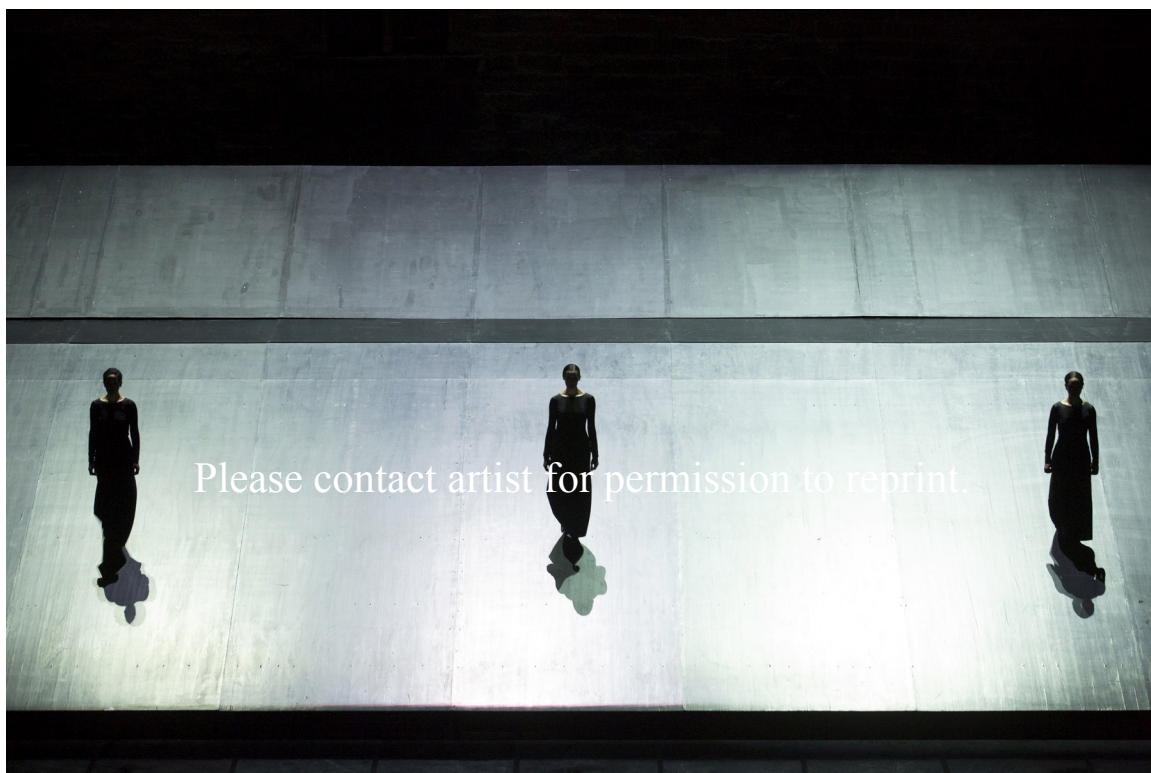




*I AM* (2014). Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Concept, set design, choreography, and direction by Lemi Ponifasio; light by Helen Todd; sound composition by Lemi Ponifasio; soundtrack from *Paradise* by Lemi Ponifasio with thanks to Marc Chesterman; performers Nina Arsenault and Kasina Campbell.

Ponifasio's work *I AM* has been described as an outrage, a nightmare, and a prayer for the living and the dead that marks one hundred years since World War I. The "war to end all wars" that saw Pacific Islanders on the front lines in Europe also involved allied offenses by New Zealand, Australia, and France against Germany in the Pacific. Struggles for the recognition of indigenous people's rights in the Pacific "Theater of War" have also been marked by tragedy and violence. *I AM* premiered at the Festival d'Avignon in 2014.



*I AM* (2014). Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Concept, set design, choreography, and direction by Lemi Ponifasio; light by Helen Todd; sound composition by Lemi Ponifasio; soundtrack from *Paradise* by Lemi Ponifasio with thanks to Marc Chesterman; performers Ria Te Uira Paki, Kasina Campbell, and Rangipo Wallace-Ihakara.

Ponifasio cites the people he works with as the main influence on the way he directs: “I named the work and the people I work with MAU . . . Truth of Existence. This orients the audience and performers towards a cosmological dimension, not the phenomenal world, not language” (Ponifasio in conversation with Moana Nepia, 6 Sept 2015).



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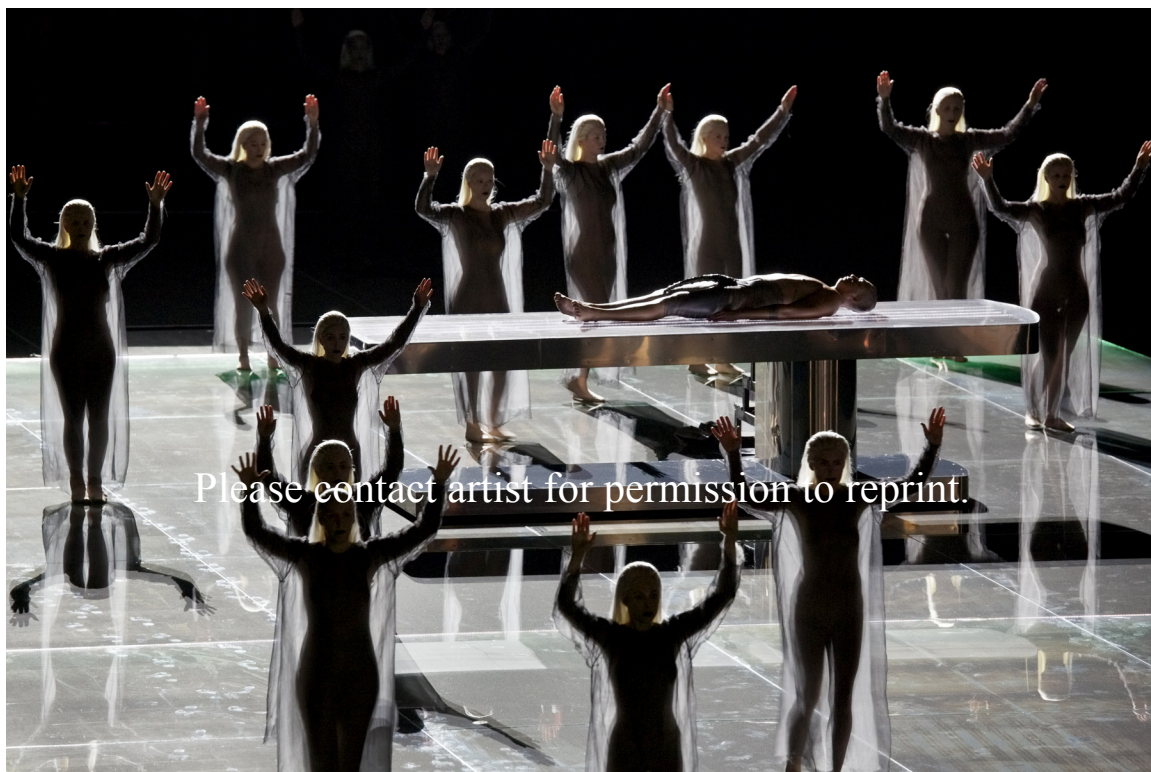
*I AM* (2014). Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

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“Performance is the moment of immortality for audience and performers” (Ponifasio in conversation with Moana Nepia, 6 Sept 2015).

Suggestions of suffering, sacrifice, and spiritual release in a crucifix of choreographic gesture and light resonate with the existential proposition “I AM” from the Book of Revelations hovering above stage in giant capitals. Referencing New Zealand artist Colin McCahon’s 1970 painting *Victory over death 2*, the citation dwarfs performers, reminding us how Christian and Western philosophical traditions can bear heavily on Pacific Islander interpretations of historical and contemporary experience.





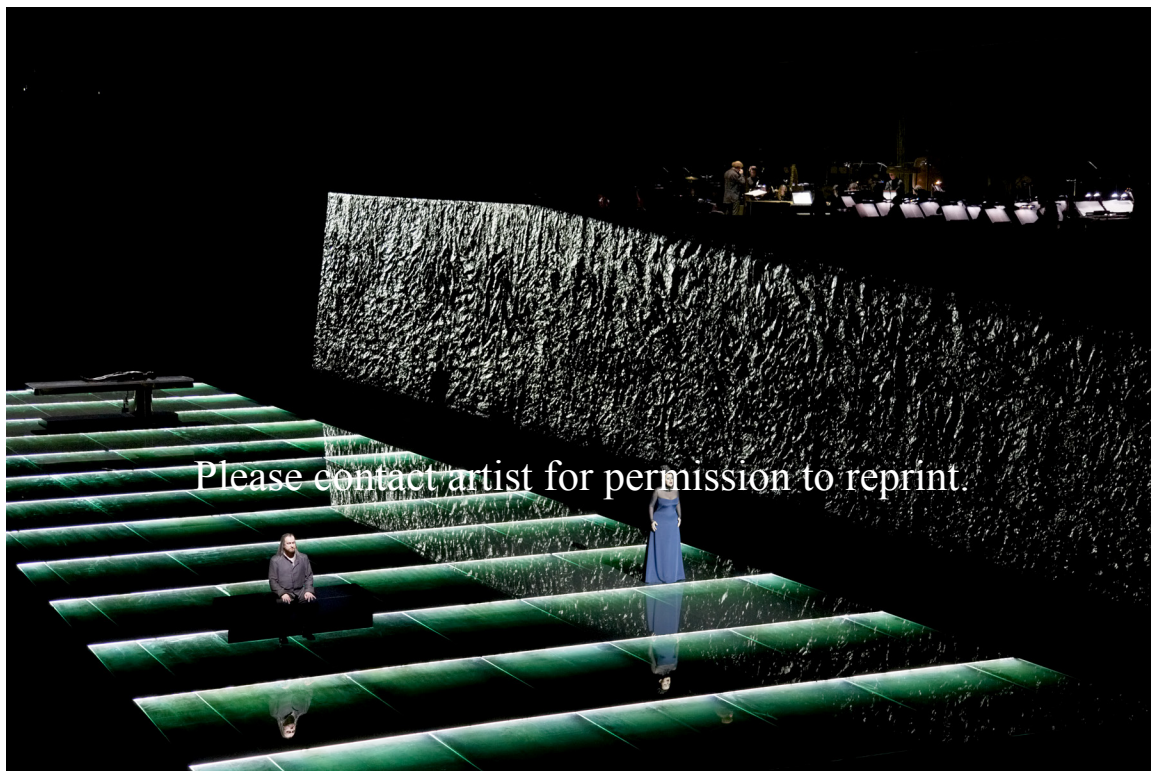
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*Prometheus* (2012). Photo by Klaus Rudolph.

Stage, costumes, and direction by Lemi Ponifasio; composition by Carl Orff; musical arrangement by Peter Rundel; sound design by Norbert Ommer; light by Helen Todd. Orchestra: Ensemble musikFabrik, SPLASH-Perkussion NRW, Orchesterzentrum | NRW, and Statisterie der Ruhrtriennale; performers: Ioane Papalii and ChorWerk Ruhr.

“I wanted to create a court of heaven and earth, where humans, animals, and gods come in ceremony to meet about what future we are going to choose” (Ponifasio in conversation with Moana Nepia, 6 Sept 2015).

Ponifasio’s epic staging of Carl Orff’s opera *Prometheus* in the Duisburg Kraftzentrale featured for the 2012 Ruhrtriennale International Festival of the Arts featured dancers from MAU alongside an international cast of singers, actors, and orchestral musicians. Based on Aeschylus’s ancient Greek tragedy, with operatic text in Greek, the production lasted two and a half hours without intermission.

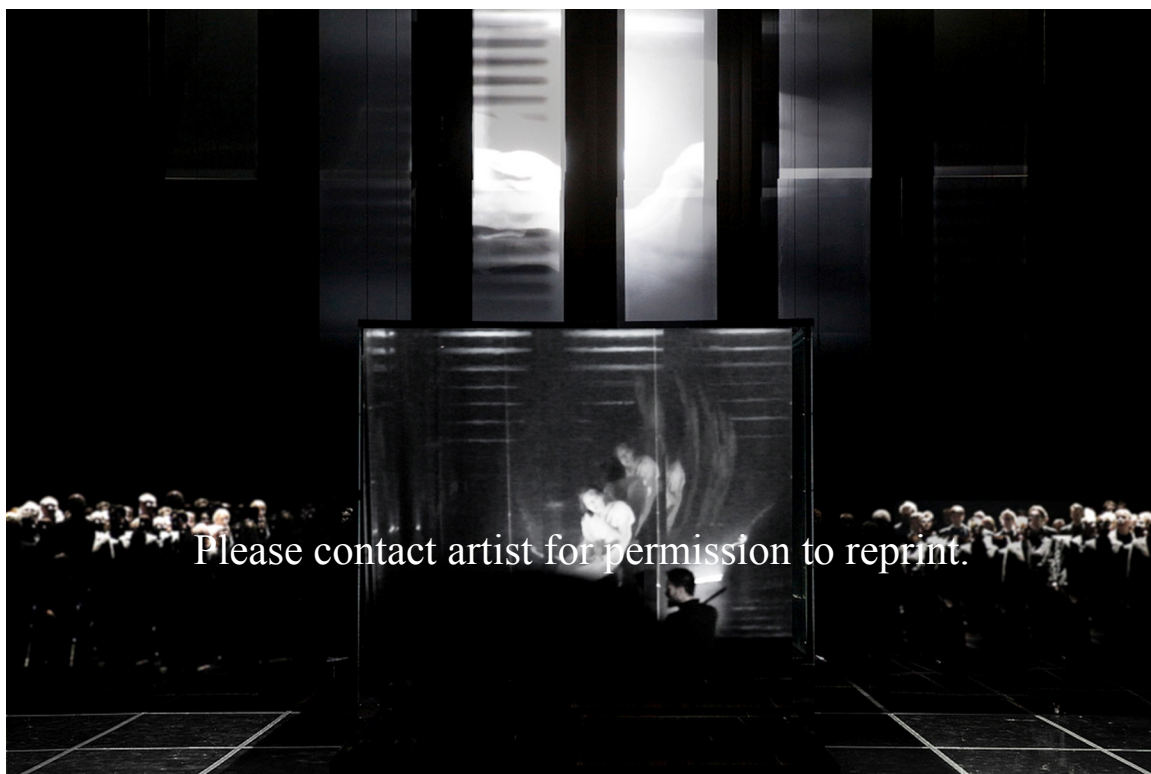


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*Prometheus* (2012). Photo by Klaus Rudolph.

Stage, costumes, and direction by Lemi Ponifasio; musical arrangement by Peter Rundel; sound design by Norbert Ommer; light by Helen Todd; performers: Wolfgang Newerla as Prometheus and Brigitte Pinter as Io. Orchestra: Ensemble musikFabrik, SPLASH-Perkussion NRW, Orchesterzentrum | NRW, and Statisterie der Ruhrtriennale.

When asked whether his production of *Prometheus* was influenced by Pacific Island concepts, Ponifasio replied: “In the design I focused mainly on the relationship with architecture—verticals, horizontals, and scale. . . . I don’t really think about Pacific concepts when working. I just make what I feel and know” (Ponifasio in conversation with Moana Nepia, 6 Sept 2015).



*Apocalypsis* (2015). Photo courtesy of MAU.

Direction, stage, set, and costume design by Lemi Ponifasio; musical composition by R Murray Schafer; conducted by David Fallis; light by Helen Todd; performers: Denise Fujiwara, Kawiti Waetford, Cantores Celestes Women's Choir, and the Element Choir.

Ponifasio has described *Apocalypsis* in several ways: “a meeting with God, John, Anti-Christ, Schafer, performers, and community—orators exhaling and inhaling the history of existence [in which] we transcend time and space [to] engage in a dialogue with those who have gone before, and those who are about to join us”; “a battlefield of voices of our souls . . . revealing what is broken within us . . . not the end of the world, but giving birth to a new world”; a provocation “asking us to elevate the human story to a new plane”; and an awakening of “inner truth” or “inner light that reminds our soul of its higher state. This is the gift of *Apocalypsis* and perhaps our life purpose” (Ponifasio interviewed by Jorn Weisbrodt, Artistic Director Luminato Festival 2015). The work premiered at the Luminato Festival in Toronto in 2015.